Talking To Children About War

Children's exposure to violence is not new. Wicked step-mothers (Cinderella) and wolves and witches (Little Red Hood, Hansel and Gretel) with a penchant for child flesh have appeared in fairy tales for two centuries.

These violent images carried greater power in the visual era, however. Petrified pre-teens plugged Dots at Dracula while their younger brothers and sisters woke up with nightmares, sweating Bambi's fate. Television supplanted movies as the primary medium. As the hours sitting before the set increased, so did the level of violence in programming and none so prominently as media coverage of world events. Unless sealed off by extreme isolation, children will see or hear about world violence, particularly in times of war. How do we talk to children about this violence, especially war?

The answer: carefully and honestly, depending on the age group. You do not have to answer all questions about war. Do not tell your children more than they want to know unless you are sure they are ready. However, children have a keen radar for anxiety; if your are not honest, they will likely sense this and worry. The National Association of School Psychologists reminds parents "that uncertainty produces anxiety in all of us."

Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D, a Human Development Specialist at Purdue University Extension, discovered that parents rarely discuss war with their children.

"Most parents do not include war in their daily conversations with children. Some never talk about it," she said.

Beginning several months after September 11th, Myers-Walls conducted interviews with children and parents. Almost one quarter of the parents reported that they never talked to their children about war. Over 40 percent of children said that they had no such conversations with their parents.

If you only have a minute to spend with this pamphlet, we suggest looking over, The Five Best and Worst Things You Can Say to Your Children About War from Chick Moorman, author of, "Parent Talk: How to Talk to Your Child in Language That Builds Self-Esteem and Encourages responsibility."

The Five Best:

1) ***"What have you been hearing about the war?"***

Ask your children questions. Begin a dialogue by showing an interest in your child's thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Ask her what she has heard at school. Ask what her friends think. Ask what she has heard on the news. Ask if she has questions. Then listen to your child's answers. Ask clarifying questions. Why do you think that? How do you think that happened? What do you think will happen next? Show an interest in your child's opinion and it won't be long before you hear, "What do you think, dad?"

2) ***"You can only watch TV for 30 minutes and I want to be present."***

War on TV can be graphic. Viewers and parents beware. In addition, seeing real human beings killed with the precision and repetition of a video game can have a numbing effect on children. War is not a game. Neither is it a sixty-minute drama interlaced with commercials. The war-related TV children watch needs to be highly regulated and supervised. Turn the TV off after the news coverage and debrief. Dialogue about what was just seen and heard. Process the presented information and help your children make meaning of this serious material.

3) ***"What do you suppose it looks like from the other side?"***

This question is parent talk that helps children learn about perspective. It helps them learn to see things from both sides of an issue and develop empathy as well. Learning to shift perspective and see things from the other side prevents your child from developing tunnel vision. It increases his understanding of the opposing view, which is an important step in effective problem-solving and conflict resolution. When children learn that it is possible to see the same thing from different angles they are better equipped to deal with the increasing diversity and differences of opinion that exist in today's world. Understanding the belief system and the perspective of another helps us anticipate reactions and predict responses on the international and on a personal level.

4) ***"I don't know what will happen, but I know we'll be able to handle it."***

When children get scared, adults often make what they think are reassuring promises. They say, "Everything will be okay," or "Nothing will happen to us. I can tell you that." These promises are not truthful. We do not know everything will be okay. We do not know for sure that nothing will happen to us. Not anymore! Tell your children the truth, "I do not know what will happen, but I know we can handle it." What you are really communicating to your child here is confidence. This style of parent talk says, "I am confident we can handle whatever comes our way. If we have to ration, we can handle it. If the price of gas doubles or triples, we can handle it. If the economy nosedives, we can handle it.

5) ***"I understand how you could feel that way."***

There are a lot of varied and strong emotions in America about war. We have hawks and doves, peace marchers and war advocates. There is debate and disagreement in the Congress. Marriage partners are often split on this issue. It is highly possible that one of your children holds beliefs about war that differ from yours. When these differences are expressed, effective parent talk includes, "I understand how you could feel that way." "I understand how you could feel that way," does not say you agree with your child. It does not say you share their beliefs or their feelings. It demonstrates and communicates an understanding of how he could arrive at that conclusion. It is filled with respect for differences and honors diversity.

The Five Worst:

1) ***"God is on our side."***

God doesn't take sides. God loves everyone unconditionally. To tell children God loves us more than He loves them is untrue. "God is on our side," is a phrase that results in children's developing false beliefs that only good things can happen to us because God plays on our team. When you say this to your children you equip them with a false sense of superiority. Feelings of superiority lead to a belief in "better than." "Better than" breeds an "us vs. them" mentality that encourages conflict, dissention, and strife.

2) ***"We are right and they are wrong."***

Everyone has a different view of the world, so no one thinks that what he or she does is "wrong." Human beings do horrible things, but they don't see them that way. They believe they are right. Their side is doing what they do because they think they are right. Our side is doing what we do because we think we are right. Being right doesn't work. Making people wrong doesn't work. Speak to your children about differences. Let them know what is similar and what is different about the beliefs, values, morals and cultures. But do it outside of the context of right and wrong.

3) ***"There is nothing you can do."***

When you say these words to your child you tell her, "You are small, insignificant, and have no power." You teach her that she is at the mercy of her environment and that she has no influence over the events of her life. You are teaching her to play her life from the victim's position. Ask instead, "What do you think we can do about this?" Help her brainstorm possible actions that can be taken. Could she donate part of her allowance to the Red Cross? Could she write a letter to a serviceman or woman? How about making a poster, saying a prayer, putting a bow on a tree, or designing a T-shirt? Tell your child, "You always have more choices than you think you have," and help her develop an "I can" stance towards life. One of the best ways to come to believe "I can do something" is simply to go out and do something.

4) ***"You don't know what you are talking about."***

Would you ever say to your child, "You're really stupid?" Or, "You're so young and inexperienced you couldn't possibly know anything. You need to live as long as I have and then you'll be worthy of having an opinion." Probably not. But when you say, "You don't know what you are talking about," you have sent him a similar message. Of course, we have more years of experience than our children. Absolutely, we have seen and heard things that they don't yet begin to grasp. But that doesn't mean we can't respect the opinion of our eight-year-old or that of our thirteen-year-old.

Listen to your child. Demonstrate your understanding of her views by reflecting them back to her with a paraphrase. Model for her a mature adult who can respect differences as well as contrary opinions.

5) ***"There is nothing to worry about."***

Children worry. They get scared. They have strong feelings about war, terrorism, and death. To tell them they have nothing to worry about is to ask them to numb their feelings, push them down, and pretend they don't exist. In emotional times children need support. They need adults in their lives who help them work through their feelings in safe ways.

Specifics and talking to different ages

Toddlers

For very young children, experts have almost a uniform opinion: minimize exposure. “More than any other action, avoiding media coverage will protect children from confusing and disturbing images,” says the National Association for the Education of Young People.

Very young children cannot distinguish fact from fantasy, hence they gain a distorted image of war. From an ego-centric three-years point of view, all bombs are aimed at their house and their Mommy and Daddy. According to Robin Goodman, Ph.D, who directs NYU School of Medicine’s Bereavement Services, young children “can easily be overwhelmed. They do not yet have the ability to keep things in perspective and may be unable to block out troubling thoughts.”

Television news is the worst, according to Dr. Alan Poussaint of the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston. “Commercial programming may be interrupted by frightening news bulletins,” he said. “Horrific images can cause nightmares and may awaken other fears and anxieties.”

If they do see images, remind them that the war is very away. You may want to show them that even in times of war, there are people trying to improve the situation. Fred Rogers said when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news, his mother would say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

Besides shielding them from war images, we also suggest.

* **Comfort your young children.** They may need lots of reassurance. Children have confidence that adults can solve their problems and provide protection.

* **Let them know that the war is very far away and that they are safe.** Dr. Ronnie Ginsberg recommends “looking at a map or globe can be a concrete method of letting children know just how far away the war is.”

* **Stick to routine.** Normal schedules of bath, reading, and bedtime reassure children of their safety.

Elementary School

In the early grades or kindergarten, the concerns mirror those of toddlers. Minimal exposure to media images, lots of hugs and talking is key. As children move up in grades, their awareness grows. Even if a child has limited exposure to war images, chances are a friend has seen more. They will talk and ask questions. Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, a specialist in

early childhood education, says that, "unfortunately, some people think that the children, in their innocence, will not know about these world events. Considering this problem over the past 20 or more years, I haven't found that to be the case."

School age children rapidly gain a sense of attentiveness concerning the world about them. They own and project imbalanced prospectives, however. For example, they will discuss events at school and with friends and tax parents with surprisingly abstract or complicated questions, like why Germany and France are so resistant to getting involved in the Iraqi conflict. Yet, more practical questions along the lines of does "Orange or Red Alert status mean a cancelled soccer game" also surface.

What to do? Again, reassurance and routine are critical. This group wants more complex solutions; pat answers suitable for young children may not win wide acceptance.

The National Mental Health Association suggests for this age group:

* **Be honest.** False reassurances don't help this age group. Don't say nobody will die. Children know this isn't true. Instead say, "I will always be here to keep you safe" or "Adults are working very hard to make things safe."

* **Monitor their television viewing**. Limit the amount of war coverage they see. Schedule an alternate activity during the news hour without calling attention to your real concern. A walk around the block, homework, a good movie on the VCR or a fun dinner around the table won't necessarily make kids feel like they're being restricted.

* **Don't be afraid to say I don't know.** Part of keeping an open dialogue with your children is not being afraid to say that you don't have all the answers. When you don't, explain that wars are very complicated and things happen that even adults don't understand.

Middle School

Children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They study war images on TV and read about the topic in magazines. They discuss the war, terrorism, and related topics among themselves and in school. David Walsh, Ph.D., President, National Institute on Media and the Family, suggests the following strategy for dealing with war and this age group.

* **Talk to your middle school children and answer any questions.** This will help you determine how much they know and may help you correct any misinformation they might have.

* **Acknowledge any feelings of fear, horror, and anger.** Provide comfort and reassurance.

* **Children this age will be more interested in what might happen in the future.**

* **Share what you know without exaggeration.** Don't burden them with fears that you might have. Some children may act out scary feelings through misbehavior. Others may become more withdrawn. Pay attention to these cues and ask them to tell you about their feelings.

* **Use historical examples (e.g. Civil War, World War II, etc.) to explain how our country has been through very difficult times before to give them a sense of hope.**

High School

If your teenager watches the news, try to watch it with them. The event may present an opportunity to hear what teenagers, closed-mouthed with their parents but free with opinions with their friends, have to say. It's a good time to talk about history and past political events. Technical questions may arise. If you don't know the answer, say so, but aid them in finding resources for their questions. Pay attention to teen humor. While often juvenile, it can often be an emotional release and a statement. Lastly, sometimes, at this age, all you can do is listen.

The National Mental Health Association also recommends:

* **Encouraging them to work out their own positions on the war** even if it differs from your own. This is an age when kids are developing personal ethics and morals, a process you can support with open discussion and debate.

* **Creating a family plan to follow in the event of an emergency.** Make sure that each family member has everyone's phone/cell numbers and knows where to meet. This will make teens feel safer and may help reduce panic if an emergency does occur.

Military families…

If you or your children enjoy a relationship with a military family, you might help your children maintain a sense of control by:

* Sending letters, cookies or magazines to those in the military and public safety jobs.

* Helping older children find a family who has a parent on active duty and arrange volunteer activities.

* Babysitting at times for that family or offering to provide occasional meals.

If you are a military family, stationed or soon to be deployed, you face a host of issues.

The National Association of School Psychologists suggests the following:

* **Keep children informed**. Children need to know the truth regarding the events taking place and the active duty assignment. Discuss what you know. At the same time acknowledge what you don't know and how things may change with time.

* **Let your children know that information may change and that you will update them as new information becomes available.** Use a map or globe to help children understand where their parent is going. Discuss events in age-appropriate terms.

* **Children can help pick up some of the duties** of the deployed parent, such as mowing the lawn, doing the dishes or taking out the garbage. However, children should not be expected to "become" the parent in terms of responsibilities.

* **Shield children from financial worries**. Concern over money can add to your anxiety, particularly in the case of reservists who have had to give up a significant income. It is fine to let children know that the family needs to be careful about spending, but they are not capable of taking on the burden of financial concerns.

* **The military has extensive support services for families of active duty members**. This includes information, family mentors, counselors, logistical support, etc. If you don't live near a military base, tap into community resources. Your children's school is an excellent place to find out about such resources. In some cases, schools are organizing support networks for military and reserve families.

* **Address concerns that a loved one may be injured or killed.** If children express concern about a loved one being killed or injured, explain that the chance of returning from this conflict is very high. Advances in medicine and technology have greatly reduced potential losses from military actions.

* **Maintain good communication between home and school.** Let your child's teacher know if a family member is on active duty and if you have any special concerns. Encourage the teacher to keep you informed as well. Parents should also remember that teachers might be under heightened stress like everyone else. Not only are they providing extra support to their students, they may also have loved ones who are called to active duty and/or trying to cope with their own personal reactions to events.

* **Teachers should assess student needs.** Listen to what students talk about. Know who has family overseas. Make time for class discussion (or activities if the children are young). Be sure to have a map or globe. Be prepared to answer questions factually or to guide discussion about difficult issues.

Different types of learners

Cynthia Ulrich Tobias points out that different kids, no matter what age, may require different mediums when talking about war.

* **Auditory learners** need to hear themselves talk. "Try to be patient with your child's need to almost constantly chatter. Be prepared to hear the same question asked several times—the auditory child needs to keep hearing himself say something until it is understood."

* **The visual child** may be repeatedly drawn to the pictures of the tragedy wanting to see the same pictures over and over until it sinks in.

* **Kinesthetic learners** need to stay moving. "Walk with them, talk with them--they will probably want to actively do something about what they are thinking."

* **Analytic learners** get overwhelmed. "Help them break it down into manageable pieces and deal with one thing at a time. Don't push too soon for a spoken response."

* **Global learners** need to know how everything fits into the big picture. Help them put the war in context with their lives. How will this affect them or those they care about? "They will usually want to talk to you about it before they read or study the concepts."

How do I know if my child is having trouble?

The NYU Child Study Center notes that "it is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about the news. Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful, and news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety." NYUCSSC recommends parents should get further help if they see such things as:

- a significant change in, or problems with, behavior such as eating or sleeping.
- sad, withdrawn, or depressed behavior that does not resolve excessive or uncontrollable worry.
- a regression to earlier behavior such as bedwetting or baby talk, acting-out behavior such as aggression in younger, and inappropriate behavior in older, children.
- avoidance of school and social contacts.
- avoidance of anything that reminds them of the war.
- frequent new, unusual, or unexplained physical complaints.
- symptoms that are affecting the child's ability to function at home, at school, with friends.

Further references:

Chick Moorman is the author of "Parent Talk: How to Talk to Your Child in Language That Builds Self-Esteem and Encourages Responsibility, and "Spirit Whisperers: Teachers Who Nourish a Child's Spirit". (Personal Power Press, toll free, 877-360-1477.) He publishes FREE E-newsletters for parents and educators. Contact him at ipp57@aol.com.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, Supporting Young Children During War and Conflict, www.naeyc.org.

The National Association of School Psychologists, Coping With War and Terrorism, www.nasponline.org.

The National Mental Health Association, Tips for Coping in Challenging Times, www.nmha.org

National Institute on Media and the Family, Tips for Talking with Children about War, www.mediaandthefamily.org.

The NYU Child Study Center, At War with Iraq: Help answering tough questions, www.aboutourkids.org.

Dr. Judith A. Myers-Walls, Purdue University Extension Service, When War is in the News, www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism.

Department of Defense, Military Family Support Information, http://www.deploymentlink.osd.mil/deploy/family/family_support.shtml.

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